When the Vice-President became A Common Laborer

Man with pipe is "Bill," the "bad egg," who was Mr. Williams's best friend at the Pittsburgh steel plant, where both worked with pick and shovel. In the center is a miner who bunked with Mr. Williams at the mines near Duluth, and at the right is an English mine worker who gave the vice-president much valuable information.

Extraordinary Story of the Wealthy Executive of Great Steel Plant Who Put On Overalls and Worked as Laborer in Mines Here and Abroad Just to Find Out What the Miners and Other Workmen "Kicked About"

Whiting Williams as Vice-President of the Hydraulic Pressed Steel Corporation of Cleveland.

Above—Mr. Williams as a dock worker in England.

At right—The Vice-President starting out to be a laborer.

THE recently announced resignation of Whiting Williams as vice-president of the Hydraulic Pressed Steel Corporation of Cleveland, Ohio, one of the large industrial organizations of the world, has brought to light a most extraordinary story of a man's departure from the usual methods employed by men of high rank in the industrial world to attain success.

Mr. Williams was the son of a wealthy Ohio banker and was given a thorough technical education in preparation for his advent into the world of big business. While at his college he decided to become associated with the steel industry, and his family prestige assured him a prominent place in this field as soon as he might wish to actively enter business.

After his graduation from college he visited many of the country's largest steel plants, his wealthy father assuring him that he might select the one with which he wished most to be identified and that arrangements would be made for him accordingly.

While making this "tour of inspection" the young college graduate observed that in almost every steel plant he visited there was "trouble with the men"—labor troubles—always dismissed as "union troubles" after only a surface consideration of the various phases of unrest. The young man decided, with the daring of the young college graduate, that he could map out an especial field for himself by discovering what might be the matter with labor conditions and find, too, their remedy.

He obtained permission from his family to associate himself with a welfare organization in Cleveland which was interested mainly in the steel workers in that vicinity.

Backed by money and prestige, Williams soon became active and so much depended upon for advice and guidance in this organization that he was chosen to be its president. The organization was subsidiary to the Cleveland Chamber of Commerce and exerted a powerful influence in welfare work throughout the city. As its director Williams came into contact with virtually every labor dispute in the district and also received virtually all complaints by laborers of unfriendly or unjust treatment by their employers.

After serving two years as head of this organization Mr. Williams decided it was time for him to gain a bit of actual experience of those conditions of which the employees at the various great industrial plants seemed always to complain. He had by now forgotten that self fixed destiny which was to make him a large stockholder and executive in some one of the country's big steel plants. Steel, however, still appealed to him and he chose for his experiment the plant of the Hydraulic Pressed Steel Corporation.

He did not go to the president with his visiting card, ask for an interview and explain his wishes. Instead he put on an old suit of clothes purchased from a second hand dealer and went to the office of the employment clerk, handing in his name as an applicant for a common laborer's job.

He was "taken on" at the regular scale of wages for the unskilled laborer. He became one of 18,000 employees, starting at the bottom of the ladder. To keep his disguise complete he moved from his fashionable apartments to a lodging house

Four years later Mr. Williams was elected by the board of directors of the corporation to be its vice-president, and into his hands was given full charge of the company's employment department, its personnel services and all its relations with its employees.

By this time Mr. Williams had worked his way through every department of the plant, never revealing his identity until he reached an executive position which brought him into contact with men who had known him as president of the Welfare Federation. It was after an explanation brought about by these meetings that he was promptly chosen as a vice-president, and when his purpose in climbing the ladder as a common workman was explained the control of the company's employees and their relations to the company was put into his hands.

Mr. Williams now returned to his better quarters, soon to be expanded into a palatial home in celebration of his marriage. He was then 30 years old—perhaps the youngest vice-president of a corporation employing 18,000 men in the country.

After two years, however, the vice-president decided that even with four years' experience in the ranks and two years in the vice-president's chair he had not learned enough. He found he was not as successful as he wished to be in establishing cordiality between the employees and the employer. He discovered that conditions elsewhere in other great industrial centers always brought about reaction in his own plant. He found the influence of workmen moving in from other communities was always disturbing. He felt that he should have a still broader experience.

He believed there was still but one way to gain this experience.

He obtained leave of absence from his board of directors. At home he searched out the overalls and jumper he had thrown aside years before. Into the pockets of these he put twenty-five dollars and after dark left his luxurious residence, also leaving careful instructions to Mrs. Williams that she was to send her letters to him always addressed to General Delivery at whatever towns he might designate to her by telegram. He didn't know where he was going or when he would arrive.

He followed the laborers' course in striking out for Pittsburgh, the largest of the steel centers. This was by freight train. "The man who is beating his way about the country almost always is just an honest workman out of work," says Mr. Williams. "Few are what the world calls 'bums.' I believed I could learn a great deal by associating with those even below the bottom."

When we arrived at Pittsburgh several days later the vice-president of one of the country's largest steel plants appeared indeed to be a laborer. His beard had grown and "I had studiously avoided soap and water," he says. "Also I had found ways to make my very good shoes appear to be worn by many rounds of job hunting."

"Taking a new name not quite so euphonic as my own I began my daily hunt for a job," says Mr. Williams. I haunted the big steel plants and the mines. 'Any chance, pardner, for a man's gettin' on to-day?' became my set speech at the employment windows. There were thousands just like me. I lined up with hundreds at every plant I visited. My only chance was in being closest to the clerk's window at a time when some foreman should send in a request for more help. My twenty-five dollars was about gone, even though I was paying but twenty-five cents a night for a bed and ten cents for each of my meals when——

"On the eighth day an employment clerk nodded his head, looked me over and said:

"'I guess you're in luck to-day, Buddy. Can you handle a pick and shovel?'

"I could and I did—for several weeks there as 'one of the gang' before the ovens. It was a steel plant.

"My best friend there was a big fellow, 'Bill,' who gave me good advice besides loaning me 'two bits' the second day I was at work in consequence of my twenty-five dollars having become completely exhausted that morning. 'Bill' said to me: 'Listen to me, Buddy, and you'll hold on. Stow the cigarettes, keep your eye on your shovel and your back to the foreman and make as if you're always workin'—then you'll get on. The foreman's a bad egg, but he won't notice you if you don't notice him.'

"When I thanked him for his advice Bill said: 'Oh, that's all right. I'm not so bad as they make out. They say I'm a trouble maker and I can't get more than the shovel an' pick, but all I wants is what's my own. If they give me that I'll lay off the trouble. Just gimme a square deal and a chance to make the old woman comfortable with her regular bread and her Saturday night jaw because I took a dollar out o' me envelope before I gets home, and I'm all right. Otherwise I'm all wrong.'

"I remembered Bill's statement of principles," says Mr. Williams, "later on when I went back to be vice-president. I saw that every man had a chance to get above the pick and shovel if he wanted it. I'd never thought of that before."

Mr. Williams cultivated Bill. They lived at the same lodging house. "You got somethin' of a eduction, Buddy," Bill remarked one evening to the vice-president of a bigger plant than they both were working for, but this was as close as any of his companions ever came to penetrating his disguise, Mr. Williams says.

"There were not so many foreigners at this plant as I wished," Mr. Williams explains, "so I decided to move on."

He had saved a bit for railroad fare and struck out for the mine country near Duluth. Here he worked in the iron mines for three months as helper and bucket man. Then he moved on to Gary, Ind., and in the great steel mills there soon found a place as "drag out man." This is perhaps the hardest job for a laborer in a steel plant. Its only requirement is physical endurance. Nearly all drag out men are foreigners. They seem to stand the endurance test better.

"Of all my experiences," says Mr. Williams, "I am proudest of the fact that I held out four weeks at this job. It was hard, but I got through. I wanted to get at the viewpoints of this class of laborer—the 'drag out' men. I wanted to know what they talked about, what they thought about and what they kicked about. Every man I know must have something to kick about. The great financier kicks about the depreciation of interest. The small one kicks about the expansion of interest. Everybody kicks about something. And it was what the laborer kicks about I wanted to learn.

"I found the drag out men kicked about everything under the sun except the hardness of their work. The great husky fellows went to their lodgings at night dripping with perspiration, dead tired and brain fagged from thinking about the pains in their muscles, but not one of them ever 'cussed' his foreman because the work was hard. They kicked about the foreman's tone of voice, about the sound of the noon whistle, about the temper of the superintendent—about the company in general and all employers in particular. But every man among them was satisfied with his job.

"They all would have liked to earn more money, of course. And periodically they decided to kick for a raise. But that of course is inherent. I kicked too when the timekeeper docked me half a day for being half an hour late one morning. And I will say I kicked as hard as any steer ever did. Perhaps it was little harder than I would have kicked if I did not want to excuse my conscience for quitting. I just couldn't stand the physical strain any longer, but I didn't want to give in—until the docking gave me a chance."

There Mr. Williams found out what men kicked about. He remembered that later when he became vice-president again.

After a few weeks as stoker in another Gary plant Mr. Williams found his seven months leave of absence expiring and he returned to Cleveland. He arrived as he had left, at night and still in overalls.

He had not told his wife he was coming. He taxied from the station to his neighborhood and dismissed the cab a few blocks from his home. He went around to his back door and rang the servants' bell. He asked the maid who answered if he might speak to her mistress. "I really need some help and perhaps the lady of the house will think it all right to give it to me."

After some coaxing the maid called her mistress. Mrs. Williams did not recognize her husband. She was persuaded to give him a two dollar bill and then he revealed himself.

"Later I had to return the two dollar bill," says Mr. Williams.

After a few months at his desk the vice-president decided he needed first hand information about conditions abroad.

With another leave of absence he went to England. At Southampton he again donned his overalls and took a job as a dock worker. Here he came into contact with one of the most interesting branches of British labor and perhaps its canniest. Also he met and talked with immigrants bound for America. He gained first hand impressions of their hopes, their plans, their expectations. All of this was invaluable to him later on at the great plant in Cleveland.

From the docks the labor adventurer went to the mines. After several weeks there he crossed the Channel and went at once to the regions being restored near Lens and Douai. Here he learned the ways of the French workman. From this district he worked his way into Germany, where in the Saar Valley he passed four months in the coal mines.

When his leave was nearly ended Mr. Williams booked passage aboard the Mauretania. When one day out to sea he applied to the chief fireman for a place among the stokers. To this officer's astonished inquiry he explained that he merely wanted to keep himself physically fit during the tedious days at sea. He moved down from his drawing room suite to the crews' quarters and was duly enrolled as a stoker, one of the shift chiefs knowing his secret. He worked at the boilers until the Mauretania swung into the Narrows.

Back at his desk again Mr. Williams found himself equipped at last to meet the employees on any ground they chose. He felt he had discovered the way to establish friendliness and trust between men and employer. He had learned, he says, the secrets of the men themselves and what they kicked about and what they wanted.

"I knew how to turn their necessity of having a good kick now and then into safe channels; how to give them what they wanted before they realized they wanted it; how to give them opportunities to grow up from the pick and shovel if they wished, and how to make them feel that whatever they knew I knew too."

And so Mr. Williams seems satisfied now to remain at home, having undertaken wider duties in the industrial field than even that of the vice-president of his former company.

Improved Electric Welding

ELECTRIC welding has two principal applications, the arc and resistance processes respectively, spot welding being a special modification of the latter applied to sheet work. These applications are unsuitable for complicated work or for sections of irregular profile, so the fusion process has been employed.

By this process the two pieces to be welded are brought sufficiently close to strike a series of arcs between them. The pieces are than gradually drawn together, so that the whole welding area appears to be enveloped in a shower of sparks, the sections being thus gradually melted in an even manner over the whole area.

The current is then switched off, and the two pieces are pressed together and united.

The strength of welds made by this process is claimed to be 98 per cent. of that of the unwelded material, and the process can be successfully applied for welding tube strips or similar material, and especially for welding tool steel cutting ends to ordinary iron or steel holders. In such cases and for all large sections it has been found advisable to bring the pieces to a red heat by using the current as in ordinary butt welding, forcibly separating them if necessary with the current switched off before starting the fusing process.